

CYNTHIA HAHN AND  
AVINOAM SHALEM (EDS.),  
*SEEKING TRANSPARENCY.  
ROCK CRYSTALS ACROSS  
THE MEDIEVAL MEDITERRANEAN*

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Reviewed by  
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Rock crystal is discussed in two chapters of Pliny's *Natural History* (XXXVII, 9–10). The author begins with the legend of the stone's formation – rock crystal allegedly being water, frozen, and solidified. He then enumerates the places of its extraction, including the East, Cyprus, the European Alps, and the coast of Arabia on the Red Sea. He also speaks of rock crystal's geometric forms and its colour, alluding to varying degrees of purity and transparency. He mentions its medical uses, the material properties of the glass-like stone, which is “not easy to penetrate”, and its polish “so exquisite, that no art can possibly equal it”.<sup>1</sup> Finally he speaks of objects – some extraordinary for their size and others famous for their association with historical figures.

Pliny inaugurates the volume *Seeking Transparency. Rock Crystals Across the Medieval Mediterranean*, edited by Cynthia Hahn and Avinoam Shalem, in the form of two short quotations. And, in fact,

<sup>1</sup>  
Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, transl. by John Bostock and Henry T. Riley, London 1855, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0978.phi001.perseus-eng1:37.9> (05.08.2021).

variations on the above-mentioned themes – legendary properties of the stone, its origins, shape and transparency, the technical skill needed to work it and its value – still set the frame for reflections about the material today. This points to an astonishing continuity in the stone’s reception. So, what is new in *Seeking Transparency*?

First, contributions to the volume cover a vast geographical and chronological range, from Mesopotamia in the second millennium BC to Northern Europe in the thirteenth century and up to the Ottoman Empire – even though, as the title of the volume indicates, a focus lies on the medieval Mediterranean. Besides this, the volume offers an interdisciplinary approach to the subject: The manifold facets of rock crystal are scrutinised through the lenses of chemical analysis, archaeological evidence, literary and theological interpretation, and various historical and art historical frames. Not all of the findings presented here are entirely new, some having been published elsewhere. However, one of the book’s greatest merits is that it brings all these studies together: A total of nineteen articles and the editors’ introduction provide a comprehensive insight into the state of research on the material and on its uses in pre-modern societies.

The overall aim of the volume, to propose a “sensible inquiry” of rock crystal objects in the pre-modern era that defies rational, “critical enquiry” (p. 8), draws inspiration from the material itself – rock crystal being at once present and absent, bright and smooth, as well as transparent and seemingly intangible. With this focus on materiality, on its function and meanings, the editors explicitly connect to a growing body of scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

The volume is arranged in six thematic sections, the first of which, *State of Study*, presents an article by Jens Kröger. His overview consists of a virtuosic interweaving of details about approaches to individual objects, such as the “Magnificent Seven” ewers, and a more general account of the evolution of scholarly methods dealing with dating and localising the production of medieval rock crystal objects. The first point made is an essential one: All remaining Islamicate rock crystal objects of outstanding quality and size were preserved in European collections – mostly church treasuries, which points to the transcultural circulation and appeal of such objects.

The second section, *Availability, Carving Techniques, and Character of Rock Crystal*, begins with a discussion of recent archaeological finds on the African east coast – notably Mayotte – which Stéphane Pradines identifies as a major hub for pre-modern rock crystal trade. This was mainly mediated by Persian merchants, who delivered crystal sourced from Madagascar to the caliphates between the ninth and twelfth centuries. The insight into African

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Several important publications, including both theoretical considerations and monographs about particular types of material have contributed to shaping the “material turn” in art history in the last decade. A substantial discussion and bibliography can be found in Aden Kumler and Christopher R. Lakey, *Res et significatio. The Material Sense of Things in the Middle Ages*, in: *Gesta* 51, 2012, 1–17.

trade routes is followed by a detailed analysis of carving techniques by Elise Morero and other scholars involved in the Edmund de Unger Fatimid Rock Crystal Project (University of Oxford). Their findings regarding tools and techniques provide invaluable guidance for the classification of carved rock crystal objects. The contribution also points to similarities between glass and rock crystal carving processes, which suggest that conceptions of workshop practice along material lines may have to be reconsidered. The next contribution turns to early medieval Europe, with uses of rock crystal objects in Merovingian and Carolingian burials. Genevra Kornbluth shows that the stone was reserved to the higher social classes. The fact that her definition of rock crystal encompasses various types of tinted, dark and white crystals, used in the same manner as transparent ones, raises the important question of how to actually define the material in a way appropriate to each of the cultural and historical contexts under investigation in this volume (p. 77). As a whole, the section remains one of disparate points. This is also the case in many of the other sections, which might have benefited from a more rigid structure in narrower thematic clusters. Cross-references, parallels, and contrasts within and beyond the sections are only seldom pointed out, which leads to repetitions and somewhat prevents a cross-fertilisation of the different approaches. However, the section certainly demonstrates the wide spread of rock crystal in medieval societies and sets the frame for the multi-disciplinary and multi-regional approach followed throughout the volume.

The four contributions that comprise the third section, *Literary Texts: From Workshops to Meaning*, investigate primary written sources on the production and meaning of medieval rock crystal objects, intertwining art history (European and Islamic), literary analysis, and aspects of social history. Marisa Galvez explores medieval conceptions of rock crystal – as solid stone and manufactured thing – in their relevance to medieval literary expressions of pure and erotic love. Stefania Gerevini's comprehensive overview of material and written sources on Western rock crystal carving from the seventh to the thirteenth century, on the other hand, provides an excellent counterpart to the technical analysis of Fatimid practice in the second section. Gerevini also questions the legitimacy of the rigid separation between Western Roman, Byzantine, or Islamic rock crystal industries. Centres of rock crystal carving could not only be identified in Cairo and Basra, but also in Venice, Paris, and the Rhine-Meuse region, for example, and evidence points to circulation and interwoven traditions. Shalem's contribution is best read as a complement to Marcus Pilz and Kröger, as it provides an analysis of primary sources on rock crystal carving in Islamic lands. Like Pilz, Shalem questions the predominance of Fatimid Egypt in scholarly discourse, for example by bringing in Abbasid sources (pp. 108–109). In the last contribution to this section, Brigitte Buettner addresses the medieval literary tradition of lapidaries and books on the properties of stones. Investigating both

texts and their illustrations, she focuses on the functions ascribed to rock crystal, such as its use as a lactation aid.

The following section, *Ancient and Roman Crystals*, starts with Zainab Bahrani's article on the Ancient Near East, which covers ca. 1800 BC to 600 AD and presents a combination of text analysis (including a Mesopotamian dream manual, in which stone types are invested with varying meanings), archaeological evidence, and considerations of specific objects. Isabelle Bardiès turns to a pair of rock crystal lion heads preserved in the Musée de Cluny, apparently acquired together with an ivory relief by Alexandre du Sommerard. She suggests that the heads and the ivory, all identified as Roman or early Byzantine (fifth to sixth century), may have been parts of a throne. Much of the interpretation is based on the belief that the objects were indeed acquired together, wherefore the argument might have been strengthened by a closer study of the circumstances of acquisition. Patrick Crowley's contribution offers a greatly enriching perspective on rock-crystal-related myths. By investigating the assertion, often found in ancient Roman texts, that rock crystal is water turned into stone, he raises the question of why this is considered a fact in ancient patterns of thought (p. 153). Investigation of this *pseudodoxia* reveals an aesthetic basis for certain claims of knowledge, according to which rock crystal stands for a concrete manifestation of a cosmic order.

*Medieval Crystal across the Mediterranean*, the most comprehensive section, combines object case studies with more general considerations. Ingeborg Krueger's contribution, for instance, sheds light on the complex relationships between rock crystal and glass objects in the Middle Ages. This provides an important reminder of the parallels between the history of glass and rock crystal carving, which are also addressed elsewhere in the volume. Krueger also shows that *cristallo*-glass was produced in Venice well before the mid-fifteenth century. Drawing on comparative analyses of carving technique and style,<sup>3</sup> Pilz argues that a large number of rock crystal objects previously believed to originate from Fatimid Egypt actually ought to be attributed to Abbasid (Iraqi) precedents, thus correcting a longstanding misapprehension in scholarship. Stefania Gerevini's study of the so-called Bern diptych, in turn, provides a magnificent pretext to delve into a discussion of material semantics and the meaning of transparency "made in Venice", which includes analyses of guild statutes, Venetian trade relations with the East, and some thoughts on the impact of Venice's liquid urbanscape on the use and perception of Venice-made rock crystal objects. Beate Fricke's analysis of a composite object of coconut-shell, rock crystal, silver, and gold from the treasury of Münster cathedral focuses on the object's prominent hinges, as embodiments of intermediaries, oscillation, and transformation. She proposes a reflection on the status of this composite object and its potential to evoke both heavenly and earthly realms.

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See also Marcus Pilz, *Transparente Schätze. Der abbasidische und fatimidische Bergkristallschnitt und seine Werke*, Darmstadt 2021.

Bissera Pentcheva's article takes up the ancient assertion that crystal is water solidified through spirit. Letting go of materiality, she investigates the "crystalline effect" in the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross in the Hagia Sophia, an aura produced both acoustically and visually, which is used to allude to the risen body of Christ (p. 213). Gia Toussaint's contribution offers, in its first part, an overview of rock crystals in medieval Latin church treasuries. The second part of Toussaint's contribution is dedicated to the association of the stone's transparency with the risen body of Christ, which is an argument also prominently put forward by Gerevini.<sup>4</sup>

In the last section, *Amulets and Magnifying Glasses*, Farid Benfeghoul and Venetia Porter turn to object categories, which are more rarely considered than the precious rock crystal ewers and vessels addressed in many of the other contributions. Benfeghoul proposes a new twist to the history of reading glasses, whose earliest appearance is recorded in thirteenth-century Venice, by looking at Islamic source material. Reading stones and magnifiers appear in the Islamic sources as early as the tenth century, but not in scientific contexts. Scientific investigations into the properties of rock crystal are evidenced, on the other hand, by a telescope from 1574 (p. 249). By looking at seals and amulets, Venetia Porter again addresses the question of the status of rock crystal. In fact, there seems to be little differentiation between rock crystal and other stones for most categories of seals and amulets, with one exception: Porter identifies this group as "magical-amulets" and shows that rock crystal seems to have been considered to enhance the function of the objects.

Overall, the contributions point to continuities in the reception and uses of rock crystal throughout the ancient world, medieval and early modern periods. As already stated by Pliny, the stone was appreciated for its rarity and material qualities, including its hardness and – above all – its transparency. Furthermore, carving rock crystal required a pronounced technical knowledge and high skill. This led not only to the perception of rock crystal objects as being of high status, but also to wonder and astonishment, resulting in their association with magical and spiritual properties, including the much-cited analogy with the tangible and intangible body of Christ – *Christus crystallus*.

The "sensible inquiry" into rock crystal, the unifying thread for the hugely diverse contexts and approaches presented throughout the volume, allows for new ways of thinking about the subject beyond the visual analysis of objects and offers an incentive for the "sensible" study of other materials, such as silk. This encompasses novel and essential considerations of the place of rock crystal in a social history of art. It also includes thinking about global connections, transcultural conceptions of value, and about the possible role of provenance research for the study of medieval objects.

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Stefania Gerevini, *Christus crystallus*. Rock Crystal, Theology and Materiality in the Medieval West, in: James Robinson, Lloyd de Beer, and Anna Harnden (eds.), *Matter of Faith. An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period*, London 2014, 92–99.